

SPECIAL REPORT

FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY NYC HUNGER EXPERIENCE REPORT SERIES

FROM THE FRONT LINES TO THE BREAD LINES: FOOD POVERTY AMONG VETERANS



Division of Research, Policy & Education

ABOUT THE FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY

Food Bank For New York City recognizes 28 years as the city's major hunger-relief organization working to end food poverty throughout the five boroughs. As the city's hub for integrated food poverty assistance, the Food Bank tackles the hunger issue on three fronts — food distribution, income support and nutrition education — all strategically guided by its research.

Through its network of community-based member programs citywide, the Food Bank helps provide 400,000 free meals a day for New Yorkers in need. The Food Bank's hands-on nutrition education program in the public schools reaches thousands of children, teens and adults. Income support services including food stamps, free tax assistance for the working poor and the Earned Income Tax Credit put millions of dollars back in the pockets of low-income New Yorkers, helping them to achieve greater dignity and independence. Learn how you can help at foodbanknyc.org.

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OVERVIEW

On November 11, 2011, many families and communities around the country will gather to participate in annual celebrations, ceremonies, parades and other events to recognize the Veterans Day holiday. This year, many of our neighbors will be nurturing excitement in anticipation of President Obama's promise to bring troops home from Iraq in time for the holiday season. And, in a few short weeks, as the media fills our living rooms with images of Thanksgiving festivities and joy, we will collectively watch the scenes of reuniting families – children, parents, partners and friends waving, crying, laughing and running into the long-missed arms of returning soldiers. Each of us will smile in a silent moment of recognizing and feeling their joy, their relief. And then the cameras will switch off, leaving us lulled into serenity, like a Hollywood blockbuster with the “happy ever after” conclusion to a story that is oft times just beginning.

From the Front Lines to the Bread Lines aims to keep the cameras rolling and raise awareness so the rest of the story can be told and heard. Offering a specific portal through which we can witness the difficulties some veterans encounter as they reintegrate into life at home, this special report illustrates that for many, coming home from the front lines represents the engagement of a formidable foe; long after the homecoming fanfare and flag waving, many returning soldiers will be lost amid the ranks of fellow veterans struggling to combat the stealth and silent approach of a new enemy; food poverty.

In recent months, a number of veterans' organizations and community and government leaders have highlighted the disproportionate level of unemployment among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Similarly, new studies have been developed to look at the specific needs of new veterans, such as women. The data presented here is an extract from the Food Bank For New York City's annual report series, *NYC Hunger Experience*, conducted in conjunction with the Marist Institute for Public Opinion.¹ This extract serves as a special report on the ability of NYC veterans to afford food for their households with the goal of fomenting further discussion and exploration of veterans' experience with food poverty.

The findings present an unexpected and grim picture of returning military personnel and retired veterans losing the battle against unemployment, low and/or stagnant incomes and spiraling costs for food and other basic necessities. One quarter of all veterans' households are experiencing difficulty affording food, and more than one third would not be able to afford food for their families within three months of losing their household income. Veterans' households are making a range of sacrifices in order to make ends meet: many are forced to forgo food in order to pay for rent, utilities, transportation, medical care and/or medicine, and many more are reducing the quantity and quality of food they are purchasing. For example, almost one third of veteran households ate smaller meals during the past year to save food or money, while more than one quarter purchased less food. Sadly, the data show that a high percentage of veterans' households sacrifice basic nutrients in order to keep a roof over their heads. Almost a quarter purchased less fresh produce and/or dairy products, while almost two fifths cut back on important sources of protein, including meat, poultry or fish.

The findings in this special report are consistent with recent studies by various organizations representing military veterans, as well as data tracked by the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. For example, the 2010 unemployment rate among veterans returning from Iraq and

¹ Food Bank For New York City contracts with the Marist Institute for Public Opinion to conduct telephone interviews with a random and representative sample of city residents. Socio-demographic findings identify which populations throughout the five boroughs are having the greatest difficulty affording food throughout the year. The complete 2011 report in this series is due to be released in late November 2011.

Afghanistan was almost 12 percent, in contrast to the approximately 9 percent national average.² Similarly, rates of homelessness are higher among veterans than the general population. Data released in a joint report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Veterans' Affairs notes that veterans are disproportionately represented in the nation's homeless population. Veterans account for 13 percent of all homeless adults in shelters in contrast to 9 percent of the total adult population. Similarly, young veterans between ages 18 and 30 are twice as likely to be homeless as their non-veteran counterparts, and young veterans living at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty line are almost four times as likely to be homeless as their non-veteran counterparts.³ For the purposes of this report, sample sizes relating to demographic subpopulations of veterans are too small to be quantitatively representative, but they mirror other trends in secondary data and therefore warrant further investigation. For example, findings indicating that female veterans and veterans of color are disproportionately impacted by food poverty mirror studies showing disproportionate rates of homelessness among the same populations.

A number of veterans' organizations anticipate that the employment and poverty situation among veterans will be exacerbated by the expected return of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan before the end of the year, and are calling on Congress to expedite the passage of legislation focused on helping veterans find jobs. Although the House passed its employment bill, the Veterans Opportunity to Work Act (H.R. 2433), in October 2011, the Senate has yet to pass the Hiring Heroes Act of 2011. As of this report going to print, hope among major veterans' organizations was diminishing that the bill would be passed in time for Veterans Day 2011.

In the meantime, the findings in this special report demonstrate that veterans are not expecting their circumstances to improve soon. Almost one third are concerned about needing food assistance, including food stamps (also known as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) or emergency food from soup kitchens and/or food pantries within the next twelve months. Threats to nutrition assistance programs in the current federal budget and deficit reduction negotiations are giving rise to concern among hunger and poverty organizations that even basic food assistance may not be available when needed, and veterans and nonveterans alike may find themselves left without even the lifeline of a soup kitchen or food pantry.

² Analysis of unemployment data as reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

³ *Veteran Homelessness: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*. (2010). United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

FINDINGS

DIFFICULTY AFFORDING FOOD

- Throughout 2011, one out of four (25 percent) households with a military veteran (veteran households) experienced difficulty affording food; this number accounts for 9 percent of all NYC households experiencing difficulty affording food.
 - Veteran households account for 4 percent of all NYC households with annual incomes of less than \$25,000 experiencing difficulty affording food.

IMPACT OF LOSS OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME

- More than one out of seven (15 percent) veteran households would not be able to afford food immediately after losing their household income.
 - Veteran households account for 8 percent of all NYC households that would be unable to afford food immediately after losing their household income.
- More than one out of three (34 percent) veteran households would not be able to afford food within three months of losing their household income.
 - Veteran households account for 9 percent of all NYC households that would be unable to afford food within three months of losing their household income.

CONCERN ABOUT FOOD ASSISTANCE

- Almost one out of three (30 percent) veteran households are concerned about needing food assistance, including food stamps (SNAP) or emergency food (soup kitchens and food pantries) within the next 12 months.
 - Veteran households account for 8 percent of all NYC households with annual incomes of less than \$25,000 concerned about needing food assistance, including food stamps (SNAP) or emergency food (soup kitchens and food pantries), within the next 12 months.

INABILITY TO AFFORD FOOD AND COPING MECHANISMS

- More than one out of ten (11 percent) veteran households did not have enough money to buy food at least once in the past twelve months.

Competing Living Expenses

- More than one out of eight (13 percent) veteran households was unable to pay for food because they had to pay for rent.
- More than one out of ten (11 percent) veteran households was unable to pay for food because they had to pay for utilities.
- Approximately 6 percent of veteran households were unable to pay for food because they had to pay for transportation.

- Approximately 5 percent of veteran households were unable to pay for food because they had to pay for medicine or medical care.

Food and Nutrition/Health Sacrifices

Throughout 2011, some veteran households were forced to sacrifice the quantity and quality of food they purchased/provided for their families and/or rely on assistance from community organizations and friends/families as follows:

Food Quantity Sacrifices

- More than one out of seven (14 percent) veteran households *skipped meals* in order to save food or money.
- Almost one out of three (32 percent) veteran households *ate smaller meals* in order to save food or money.
- More than one out of four (28 percent) veteran households *purchased less food* in order to save food or money.
- More than one out of six (17 percent) veteran households *served fewer family members at mealtimes* in order to save food or money.
- Almost one out of ten (8 percent) veteran households *eliminated holiday meals or Sunday dinner* in order to save food or money.

Food Quality Sacrifices

- More than one out of seven (15 percent) veteran households *purchased less healthy food* in order to save food or money.
- More than one out of five (22 percent) veteran households *bought less fresh fruit and vegetables* to stretch their grocery dollar.
- More than one out of five (22 percent) veteran households *bought less dairy products* (such as milk, yogurt or cheese) to stretch their grocery dollar.
- Almost two out of five (39 percent) veteran households *bought less meat, poultry or fish* to stretch their grocery dollar.

Reliance on Food Assistance

- Almost one out of four (24 percent) veteran households *ate meals at friends' or relatives' homes* in order to save food or money.
- Approximately one out of ten veteran households relied on emergency food assistance:
 - Four percent of veteran households *ate meals at a soup kitchen or other emergency food program* in order to save food or money.
 - More than one out of thirteen (7 percent) veteran households *obtained food from a food pantry* in order to save food or money.

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME STATUS

- Of all veteran households, almost two out of five (37 percent) have one or more household members who are employed, retired veterans account for almost half (48 percent) and the remaining 15 percent are not employed.
- Almost one out of five (18 percent) veteran households has an annual income of less than \$24,999.

- More than one out of five (22 percent) veteran households has an annual income between \$25,000 and \$49,999.
- More than one out of four (26 percent) veteran households has an annual income between \$50,000 and \$74,999.
- More than one out of three (34 percent) veteran households has an annual income of more than \$75,000.

MANHATTAN OFFICE

39 Broadway
10th Floor
New York, NY 10006
t: 212.566.7855
f: 212.566.1463

WAREHOUSE/DISTRIBUTION CENTER

Hunts Point Co-op Market
355 Food Center Drive
Bronx, NY 10474
t: 718.991.4300
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